

What Good are Stories? Literary Understanding and Moral Imagination

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What good are stories? That is, what impact do stories have upon us such that they might make us better people? What role can stories play in our moral development, in the cultivation (or perhaps, corruption) of our characters? Plato, as we heard in an earlier paper, was deeply impressed by the power of story, and more generally of the arts, recognizing their capacity to mold our characters, particularly those whose imaginations are most impressionable, namely, the youth. For this reason, Plato advocated a vigilant censorship upon which stories should be permitted to be told in his ideal republic; he even goes so far as to suggest that the poets themselves not be admitted, given that the nature of their work, as imitative, is twice removed from reality, truth, and goodness.

However, despite Plato's seemingly harsh critique of poetry (which, we can interpret here as "literature"), it should not be forgotten that in the final book of the *Republic*, Plato also says, in his customary open-minded manner, that if anyone can provide reasons for the beneficial value of literature, he is more than willing to listen. Plato states, "(L)et us admit, that, if the poetry whose end is to please . . . , can give any reasons to show that they ought to exist in the well-ordered city, we for our part will gladly welcome them home again. . . . And I suppose we shall also allow those of her patrons who are lovers of poetry, without being poets, to advocate her cause in prose by maintaining that poetry is not only pleasurable, but also beneficial in its bearings upon governments, and upon human life" (*The Republic*, 606d).

It is the aim of this paper to do just that: to provide, in prose, reasons for why poetry, or, more generally, *stories* can be beneficial as well as pleasurable. Or, to employ more precise

philosophical terminology, that stories do not merely have *aesthetic* value insofar as they entertain us by evoking a sensory and imaginative enjoyment (which no one, I think, denies), but also that stories can have an *ethical* as well as *cognitive* or *epistemic* import. In fact, I argue that stories disclose a kind of ethical knowledge or *moral understanding*. In making this argument, I will rely upon some key concepts and principles in the philosophy of Plato's famous student and later colleague and friend, Aristotle.

1. Preliminary Points

Before turning specifically to Aristotle, however, a few preliminary points need to be clarified. First, when using the term "story," what I mean is what most contemporary scholars refer to as "literary fiction." By "fiction" is meant merely a non-factual narrative, typically taking the form of a novel, short story, or drama (play), though it would also include the epic poem. By "literary" is meant a "serious" work intended by the author to convey something of more cognitive or intellectual significance than mere entertainment.

Secondly, in arguing that some works of literary fiction provide moral understanding, I am not claiming that *all* works of literary fiction, to be considered as such, must convey this kind of understanding. Peter Lamarque, an influential contemporary philosopher of literature, argues that because there are clearly some stories that fall under the category of "literary fiction" that do not convey a kind of understanding considered as a form of truth or knowledge, then there must be some other quality or defining characteristic that distinguishes a work to be literary as such. Noel Carroll, however, has pointed out that just because there are certain essential features that make, for example, a motor vehicle a motor vehicle, that does not prohibit us from identifying those specific features exhibited in sports cars; for instance, the capacity to hold the road at a sharp

angle and high speed is a necessary feature of a good sports car but not of a good utility van. Similarly, Carroll argues, there is a sub-class or species of literary fiction (what he recalls realist literature) that provides moral understanding such that this feature need not be necessary or essential quality of *all* works of literary fiction, though it is for realist literature.

Thirdly, whenever one ventures into the realm of cross-disciplinary studies, one typically receives criticism from both sides of the aisle. As to the question of whether fictional literature can convey a kind of truth or knowledge, many contemporary philosophers of literature are skeptical. They are skeptical for the seemingly obvious reason that if a literary work purports to be *fictional* (i.e., non-factual), then clearly its forfeiting its right to be called a “true story.” After all, does not the very term “fictional” means “not true,” “not real,” etc.? On the other side of the aisle, many contemporary literary critics also do not like to use the “t-word” (truth) in relation to literature. For gone are the days of Plato and Aristotle when literature (and art in general) is thought to be mimetic, that is, an imitation or representation of nature or reality. Rather, literature as creative art produces its own autonomous world; hence, such a world, as original, has its own rules and values, ones that are not referable or reducible to the real world. Such reference, these literary theorists argue, restricts the freedom of the creative work in producing its imaginary world: after all, in fiction, poetic license permits witches to fly on broomsticks, superheroes to stop speeding bullets with their hands, etc. To refer aspects drawn from the imaginary world back to the real world is, therefore, a confusion, or what philosophers call a category mistake. Given the arguments of philosophers of literature and literary critics alike, it would seem, then, that when discussing the value of stories, we should refrain from the suggestion that what they offer is any kind of knowledge or truth, be it ethical or otherwise.

And yet, despite the heady arguments of these mostly analytic and postmodern theoreticians, there remains a problem: namely, the fact that many of us, as Martha Nussbaum, in echoing David Copperfield, puts it, “read for life,” That is, we read works of literary fiction, both past and present, that do not merely provide aesthetic pleasure by expressing something original, but also convey something of practical significance concerning ourselves, our world, and how we are to live. In short, they teach us something about life. This insight is what John Gibson calls the “humanist intuition.” And yet, the skeptics ask, “how is such so-called understanding manifested?” (2007). How do we explain the structure, or what John Searle calls “the mechanisms” (Searle), by which such understanding (considered as a kind of truth) is supposedly conveyed through works of fiction? I will offer a suggestion, but first let us probe deeper into the philosophical problem of “fictional truth.”

2. The Problem of “Fictional Truth”

Many contemporary analytic philosophers are skeptical about assigning cognitive value or truth claims to works of fiction because of both the form and the content of our expressions of truth. In terms of its form, truth must be expressed, they argue, through statements or propositions. For example, we state *that* “George Washington was the first president of the United States” (an historical truth); we state *that* “water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit” (a scientific truth); or we state *that* “Something cannot be X and not X at the same time, place, manner, etc.” (a philosophical or logical truth). But what exactly, the skeptics ask, is the truth *that can be stated* through reading a work of fiction? I will consider this question below, but first, in terms of its content, it is also not clear whether the truth expressed through fiction is a *particular* or *universal* truth. History, for instance, is aimed at revealing particular truths. What happened, how it happened, why it happened, etc. The “it” here is a particular, factual event,

person, period, etc. – the Revolutionary War, the life of George Washington, the Renaissance.

The other two kinds of truth presented above (scientific and logical) are general or universal laws or principles. To be sure, we can give examples or instantiations of these laws or principles that experientially illustrate or provide empirical evidence for these truths. We can put a pot of water on the stove and then take its temperature when it begins to boil. We can make statements like “it is raining outside right now” and “it is not raining outside right now” to show the logical absurdity of conjoining these two statements. But, in both cases, in presenting the *truth*, we make general or universal statements, that is, we move from the particular to the universal – or, in Aristotle’s terms, we *abstract* the universal truth from the particular instances.

Now what about so-called “fictional truths”? The form of fiction as a narrative typically unfolds in a description of particular persons in particular places undergoing particular experiences. For example, Elizabeth Bennett meets Mr. Darcy at Netherfield in *Pride and Prejudice* and the story unfolds from there. The description of these particulars, however, are obviously not intended to refer to some actual, historical or factual reality. The described events did not *really* happen. Hence, fiction, though describing a narrative of particular persons, places, events does not refer to any particular, factual persons, events, etc. They are, as some critics put it, “self-referential.” It seems, then, if there are truths revealed through literary fiction, they must be more general or universal in terms of their content.

Now there are some contemporary philosophers who take up this line of reasoning and so defend a kind of literary truth by arguing that content of the propositional truth disclosed through literature is psychological or ethical. What we learn from fiction is something universal about human nature, our world, or how we should (or should not) live. Although I think they are right in terms of the content of this truth, they are wrong, I argue, in terms of the form. For the

problem, as the skeptics point out, is that whenever one tries to *state* in propositional form the universal truth that is revealed through a particular work, one finds that the seemingly profound and deep truth revealed through literature becomes rather trivial or banal when abstracted from the rich, detailed complexity of the story. For example, what psychological or ethical truth might we learn from reading Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*? Well, we might learn the truth that "pride and prejudice keep otherwise attractive and intelligent people apart" (Stolnitz). Or, what might we learn from Sophocles's play, *Antigone*? We might learn the truth that "hubris leads to human downfall," or, "pride goes before fall." When stated in such a bald straight-forward manner, however, the seemingly profound literary truth becomes overly simplistic, even trivial. Too much of what makes the story a good story seems to be left out. Moreover, one can argue that we did not even *learn* such commonplace truths from reading the novel or play, we merely see these truths (which we already knew from previous experience) illustrated or exhibited in the literary works. So, the real value of these literary works – what interests and holds our attention – is the subtle, nuanced description of the particulars, that is, the specific characters, settings, and scenes, the complicated interactions, relationships, intrigues, and arguments between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett, between Creon, Antigone, and Haemon.

We can see, then, the problem of trying to defend the claim for fictional truth in terms of the *form*, that is, as stated in a proposition. But not all philosophers, who defend literary truth, argue that the psychological or ethical truths disclosed through literary fiction must be expressed in propositional form. Rather, they (and I include myself among them) argue that literary truth is *sui generis*, that is, literary truth possesses its own unique epistemic structure such that it cannot be measured according to the models and methodologies of other forms of truth, namely, historical, scientific, philosophical, and so forth. What then is this structure?

3. Aristotle and the Universal in the Particular

Let us now turn to Aristotle. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle makes the following well known statement:

(T)he poet's task is to speak not of events which have occurred, but of the kind of events which could occur . . . It is for this reason that poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars. A 'universal' comprises the *kind* of speech or action which belongs by probability or necessity to a certain *kind* of character – something which poetry aims at *despite* its addition of particular names (*Poetics*, 1151a36-1151b10).

Here we find Aristotle making the surprising claim that fiction is more universal and serious than fact. Why? Because the 'universal' revealed through literary fiction comprises the *kind* of speech or *kind* of action which belongs to a certain *kind* of character. In reading literary fiction, in other words, we understand that the characters, the situation, the actions, as types or kinds, represent more than the themselves as particulars; hence, they are more universal. But if fictional truths are to some extent universal, are they structurally the same as scientific and philosophical truths? In other words, can the universal truth be abstracted from the particulars and in turn stated in bald propositional form? I argue not.

Given the above passage, it is not uncommon for those who defend a form of literary truth in relation to Aristotle to speak of the universal *in* the particular. But what exactly does this illusive notion mean? To explain, let us first look at an important conceptual distinction made by Aristotle. In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between theoretical reason (*episteme*) and practical reason (*phronesis*). The distinction between these two modes of reason is determined by the distinct objects or ends toward which reason is directed in its thinking. The aim of theoretical thinking is universal knowledge for its own sake. The aim of

practical thinking is a concrete decision and in turn specific action in the present situation, the here and now.

Now the difference in ends is what determines the distinct realm toward which reason is directed. We can say the realm or focus of theoretical reason is the universal. Particulars are often involved in theoretical reasoning but in service to the universal (as instantiations or empirical evidence). For example, I undertake my experiments in the science lab and from the particular, empirical evidence that is gathered I conclude *that* water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit. In contrast, in practical reasoning, universal principles (as major premises) are involved but in service to the particular. In principle, I know that cheating is wrong; so, when presented with the particular opportunity to cheat on my exam, I apply this principle in the present situation and so choose, hopefully, not to cheat. Hence, it is not knowledge *of* the universal that is ultimately sought for in practical thinking but rather the *application* of the universal *to* the specific situation. Now if it were that simple, practical decision-making would be easy. Aristotle, however, recognized that typically situations are quite complicated; hence, the difficulty we often have in knowing what the right thing to do is, given the complex circumstances. For this reason, Aristotle thinks that in the practical realm, although we apply universal principles, it is the ability to read the particulars of the situation that is most important. So, knowing the right thing to do in a situation requires not only that the agent possesses true universal principles but also that the agent has the correct *perception* of the relevant particulars in the given situation. Hence, the practically wise person is the one who reads a particular situation correctly and so responds appropriately. A general on the battlefield, must possess the right strategic principles, but ultimately he needs to read the situation correctly so as to apply the principles of wartime appropriately.

This is one of the significant advances Aristotle made over his teacher Plato, who seemed to think that a purely rational or theoretical knowledge of universal values and principles is sufficient to do the right thing. For Plato, as well as for many contemporary ethicists who follow in the Kantian and utilitarian traditions, pure reason needs to move beyond imaginative and emotional engagement in order to discern the right thing to do. In such conceptions, imagination and emotion are viewed as obstacle or threats to correct ethical discernment and practical decision making.

In contrast, for Aristotle practical reasoning necessarily requires imaginative and emotional engagement in a way that abstract, theoretical reasoning does not. For Aristotle held that the faculty of imagination (*phantasia*) is not primarily the capacity to create new images but rather the ability to perceive salient and subtle aspects of concrete particulars (*aisthesis*). A *phronisimos* or practical wise person will possess an acute and vivid imagination insofar as she perceives the subtle nuances of a complex situation; this is what enables her to read the situation appropriately. Just as a painter will look at a natural landscape and see subtle shades of color that escape the untrained eye, so too the practically wise person possesses an alert imaginative sensitivity to the relevant particulars of the situation.

Moreover, for Aristotle, in practical reasoning, emotional responsiveness is not detached from, let alone a detriment to, rational cognition; rather emotional responsiveness is intimately and necessarily connected to ethical discernment. In fact, the appropriate emotional response to a given concrete situation is both a sign *of* understanding as well as a means *to* understanding. For instance, the appropriate emotional response to a loved one's death is a sign that the bereaved truly knows the loved one has died. Without the emotional response, the awareness of the loved one's death seems too abstract and so lacking something. Nussbaum says,

Good perception is a full recognition or acknowledgement of the nature of the practical situation; the whole personality sees it for what it is. The agent who discerns intellectually that a friend is in need or that a loved one has died, but who fails to respond to these facts with appropriate sympathy or grief, clearly lacks a part of Aristotelian virtue. It seems right to say, in addition, that a part of discernment or perception is lacking. This person doesn't really, or doesn't fully, *see* what has happened, doesn't recognize it in a full-blooded way or take it in. We want to say that she is merely saying the words. "He needs my help," or "she is dead," but really doesn't yet fully *know* it, because the emotional part of cognition is lacking.¹

What Nussbaum is describing here, then, is kind of cognition or knowledge that is not purely rational or intellectual, but one that requires the whole person insofar as it involves imaginative and emotional engagement. Such an engagement is what connects literature, and particularly the novel, to practical wisdom. For the same kind of vision or perception is required in reading and engaging the particulars of a fictional situation.

The Aristotelian agent is a person whom we could trust to describe a complex situation with full concreteness of detail and emotional shading, missing nothing of practical relevance. . . But this means that the person of practical wisdom lies surprisingly close to the artist and/or the perceiver of art, not in the sense that this conception reduces moral value to aesthetic value or makes moral judgment a matter of taste, but in the sense that we are asked to see morality as a high type of vision of and response to the particular, an ability that we seek and value in our greatest artists, and especially our novelists, whose value for us is above all practical and never detached from our questions about how to live.²

In literary fiction, what we attain is a certain moral vision that is sufficiently nuanced so that it can say something of significance concerning how we are to live. Although Nussbaum is helpful in linking imagination and emotion to practical reasoning, my own view is that she makes too quick a leap from literary understanding to practical wisdom in a way that is similar to how Plato leapt too quickly from theoretical knowledge to practical wisdom. For Aristotle, to be practically wise, i.e., virtuous, it is not enough to know the good (theoretically), we must do the

¹ Martha Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 79.

² *Ibid.*, 84.

good, that is practice the good such that we habituate our dispositions into a strong, stable, virtuous character. The same holds for literary understanding. For although certain stories do convey practical knowledge about ourselves and our world, concerning how we are to live, I do not think the writing, reading, and discussing of stories is sufficient to make us good people. For, as Aristotle, insists we ultimately must *act* upon such knowledge. That said, I do think certain stories can provide *moral understanding* as a specific kind of truth or knowledge that is distinct from theoretical knowledge, one that is necessary though not sufficient, in making us better people. What is the difference?

In chapter 10 of Bk. VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses the notion of *sunesis* or understanding. He explains that understanding is distinct from both theoretical knowledge (*episteme*) and practical knowledge (*phronesis*). First, understanding is distinct from theoretical knowledge in that (like practical wisdom) understanding is directed toward the concrete realm of particulars. In other words, understanding is contextual or situational rather than general. At the same time, however, the object or end of understanding is not decision and concrete action; rather its aim (like theoretical reason) is *learning*; hence, its end is a kind of knowledge for its own sake. Although concerned with the same things as practical wisdom, namely, the particulars of a concrete situation, we recognize in those particulars something of significance concerning how we are to live our lives. Such understanding terminates not in a concrete choice (I will do x), but in a judgment (in this situation, x is the appropriate or inappropriate action by character Y because of factors, a, b, c, etc.) We analyze the particular situation in order to understand it and in doing so learn something of significance in regard to ourselves, our world, and so forth. Hence, when making the appropriate judgment what we learn is kind of situational truth. That is,

in this *kind* of situation, with these *types* of characters, such and such actions are good or not good.

As we saw with practical wisdom, understanding also involves emotional responsiveness (e.g., sympathy) in a way that theoretical reason does not. Aristotle explains that the person of understanding is one who is sympathetic in her judgments. “Sympathetic judgment,” Aristotle states, “is judgment which discriminates what is equitable and does so correctly; and correct judgment is that which judges what is true” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1143a22-24).

Here, then, we can begin to see the outlines of the structure of that illusive notion of the “universal in the particular.” To truly grasp the meaning of a story one must imaginatively and emotionally identify with the characters and scenes in the story. The good storyteller provides a vivid and nuanced description that draws us into the story. At the same, we also are cognitively aware that these particulars represent something more than themselves as particulars. We see in these actions, characters, events, and situations something of ourselves and our own possibilities. Once more, a quote from Nussbaum:

[O]ne of the things that makes literature something deeper and more central for us than a complex game . . . is that it speaks . . . *about us*, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections. As Aristotle observed, it is deep, and conducive to our inquiry about how to live, because it does not simply (as history does) record that this or that event happened; it searches for patterns of possibility – of choice, and circumstance, and the interaction between choice and circumstance – that turn up in human lives with such a persistence that they must be regarded as *our* possibilities. And so our interest in literature becomes . . . cognitive: an interest in finding out (by seeing and feeling and otherwise perceiving) what possibilities . . . life offers to us, what hopes and fears for ourselves it underwrites or subverts.³

³ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, 171.

Such possibilities for our lives, considered as situational truths, are not demonstrated through rational analysis and argument (as in philosophy) or through the collection and computation of empirical data (as in science); rather these possible, situational truths are shown to us through the story. The truth is demonstrated through the vicarious lived experience we undergo in engaging whole heartedly in the story. In Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, for example, we imaginatively identify with a man who built his life on the values of pleasure, power, and propriety, sacrificing along the way, any deep meaningful relationships he might have had with his family and colleagues. When struck down by an unexplainable illness, Ivan is forced to confront his mortality and through this ordeal, he learns that his life was not "the Real Thing." That somehow, he had been deluded and had missed out on it, on real life. The cathartic recognition of this horrible and tragic truth happens on his death bed, in the final pages of the story. And yet, it is not only Ivan, who recognizes this tragic truth, but we as readers as well. Having experienced the story through literary engagement, we learn this truth, not merely cognitively, but also emotionally, imaginatively. Apart from imaginative, emotional engagement, we cannot be said to truly *understand* the story and the good it reveals to us.